Are You Right for an Aussie?

*By Nannette Newbury*

I try to remain positive and open to all requests from people who would like to bring an Aussie into their lives. And in my educational materials I strive to maintain a positive approach to owning the breed. As with all breeds, these dogs are not for everyone…however, this is fact is generally ignored by anyone who thinks that they want one, LOL!

So, I am providing a more direct list of what is NOT the ideal living situation for this breed, in my personal experience. Keep in mind that these are general guidelines and there are of course, exceptions to everything. I am also incredibly particular where I place my dogs. So, take the following in the manner in which it is being shared, with the best interest of the dogs in mind.

**Background**While you may have been attracted to the breed by seeing one at the dog park, took care of a friend’s Aussie, are attracted to the breed because they are intelligent, active and you love the way that they look…it is important to understand the relatively shorty breed history of this working stockdog that was primarily developed on the West Coast perhaps around the mid- to late 1800’s. The breed came to public prominence after WWII when they first appeared in rodeo clown acts and were featured in silent movies and then several Walt Disney films.

The point to understand is that up until fairly recently this was a ranch dog…a working ranch dog. In order for the breed to survive however, now and in the future, they have had to transition into a companion animal. That transition does not happen overnight. The prey drive that makes them such diligent livestock herding dogs is not necessarily a trait that most pet owners can live with.

And, I am not talking about “aggressively herding children” or “nipping” people. Both of these are unacceptable behaviors in a companion animal. While the behavior is understandable based on the history of the breed, accepting this behavior and allowing it will potentially land you in a very expensive lawsuit.

The many traits that we as Aussie owners/breeders have come to live with do however transition into the companion animal realm. Raising an Aussie puppy to adulthood takes a fair amount of skill and dog knowledge; more than the average pet breed.

**Less than Ideal Homes for Aussies**

* Cities, apartments, townhomes, rental homes, dorm rooms…I hope this is self-explanatory for a high-energy ranch/working dog.

I do not care how many wonderful Aussies you see running around The City, if you live in downtown San Francisco in a condo or apartment, this is not an ideal home for an Australian Shepherd. For those of you who work full time, but think you are active, while this may in fact be true, most of time I find that people living and working in the City are active on the weekends. You jog every morning? Wonderful. For health considerations you should not be jogging and running with a puppy until they are at least two years old, when the growth plates on their bones have closed. And I do not recommend running them on pavement for extended periods of time, ever.

What does your dog do locked up in a condo all day while you are at work? For those of you who work from home or have workplaces where you can have a dog? Well if you are “working” you are not playing with the dog training the dog; providing mental and physical stimulation for the dog. Being there is of course a plus, but do not think for a moment that a growing active Aussie puppy is going to sit calmly and quietly under your desk all day.

The one thing that Aussies adore more than just about anything: Off-leash running. To be fair this is becoming increasingly difficult, not only in a downtown environment, but in the suburbs as well. For a breed making the transition from ranches to homes, however this is one trait that you as an owner should try to fulfill

* Homes where no one is home. If everyone in the home is working and you are buying a dog to sit in your backyard during the day, this is not the breed for you. They are “velcro” dogs that love being with their person. Can dogs live okay lives in your backyard all day waiting for you to come home and just spend several hours with you before you go to bed? Sure, but again this list is not about what dogs can adapt themselves to, it is about providing an environment where the dogs thrive and are fulfilled and happy.
* Homes with elderly dogs that are nearing the end of their lives. Many people wish to avoid the pain of losing an older pet. Getting a new puppy for you to avoid pain and loss is incredibly disrespectful to the older dog. Firstly your senior citizen likely will not enjoy the non-stop antics of a new puppy, especially a puppy hanging off their ears and face with razor sharp puppy teeth. Congratulations to you for having a dog that has made it to old age. Respect that dog and let him/her live out their limited days as cherished members of your family being loved and the center of attention.
* Teachers with time off during the summer. I know it seems like a great idea to get a puppy when everyone is home for the summer. So, you get a new pup, have fun with it, raise it with you non-stop during the summer. What happens to that puppy when school starts up again and you go back to work full-time? You have raised a puppy that thinks life is normal having you around all the time. And then you disappear. Quite confusing to the animal; likely a recipe for separation anxiety and other behavioral issues.
* Homes with pre-school age children. Pediatricians warn that this age group of kids is not able to interact with a dog properly based on their mental development and that most children that are the recipients of dog bites are in this age group and bit by the family dog. While dogs and kids are a great combination, for the safety of your child and the pup consider waiting until your child is of an age to be able to be interact more safely around the pup.

Many parents call me and want their kids to grow up with a family pet as they did. If you get your two-year old a puppy, when your child is ten years old and at an age to truly bond with and interact in a meaningful way with your dog, the dog will be starting to age and not necessarily be as youthful and agile as your child. When your child is 12 years old you will likely be dealing with explaining the death and loss of a treasured pet with your child.
* University students, Doctorate students. If you are going to school and studying, not living in a home you own and do not know what direction your life is headed in the next several years, it is not a ideal time for a dog. Aussies can be returned to breeders, rehomed, or taken to shelters for lifestyle changes such as getting married, getting divorced, changing jobs, moving, having children. I know you are saying, “I would never do this!” Yes, well everyone that had these dogs said the same thing. Consider waiting until you have long-terms plans in place.
* Getting an Aussie when you do not own your own home is not generally a great idea. As a landlord myself and a great dog lover, I no longer rent to folks with dogs and for good reason. The amount of damage that has been caused to my property from pet owners is financially staggering. Yes, poor pet owners before you have caused this situation, but in reality, the worst damage I suffered to my property was from dog “friends” who rented from me! You will find it incredibly difficult to rent a home with a dog. Thus, if you have to move, and cannot find a home to rent that will take pets, you will have to rehome your dog. Aussies do not do well handed around from home to home.
* Novice dog owners; and I do not mean people that had a family pet when they were kids. If you have not had a dog that you solely owned, raised, trained as an adult, I would consider you a “novice.” This is not a derogatory term, it is a term that can be well used by breeders and potential owners to determine the potential success of your ownership of this breed.
* First-time dog owners; if you have never owned a dog as an adult and did not grow up around dogs, this is likely not an ideal breed for your first attempt at a dog as a pet in your home.
* Fanatically clean, germ obsessed people. This breed sheds, a lot. They require regular brushing. If you do not have time to brush your dog on a regular basis, then this is not the breed for you.

NOTE: An increasing trend I am seeing is Aussies that have been “shaved” by a groomer. Breeds with double coats such as the Aussie have these coats to protect them from the environment including heat and cold. Shaving an Aussie to make it more comfortable in the heat actually increases the skin temperature on the dog. Shaving has other consequences as well including creating skin conditions.

This is not a breed that requires regular bathing or professional grooming. It is a breed with a wonderful wash and wear coat; one of the positives of the breed. They can be out playing in the dirt and mud, dry off and be white again…all without a bath. Do not over-bath this breed, especially a a groomer who knows nothing about the breed.

If you find yourself somewhere on the above list, you may be upset or angered at my directness. Please do not take any of my comments personally. My job and the job of preservation breeders is to ensure that this dog is a fit for you, your family and that the dog will thrive in your care, forever. If you fall into one of the categories above and remain convinced that you are “different” and can provide an environment where this breed will not only survive, but thrive, more power to you.

You can always find a “breeder” that will sell you an Aussie puppy no matter what. And when you bring that dog home and fall into one of the pitfalls I have cited above, I truly hope you remember this article and not make the same mistakes twice for the sake of the dog.